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Argentine President Videla during speech on Tuesday

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Argentina: The Military Junta

Argentina's military junta has largely completed the task of consolidating its position and reorganizing the government. The officers are firmly in control and are making it clear that they do not soon intend to relinquish power.

Everything the junta has said and done thus far indicates careful advance preparation and an eye for public relations. Last week, the officers handled the takeover skillfully. This week, they are using a period of political calm to project an image of moderation as they try to build popular support.

Public relief at the ouster of the chaotic Peron government is contributing to a "honeymoon" period.

The officers' public statements emphasize conciliation and reject vengeance and totalitarianism. The junta quickly eased the press censorship it had imposed, removed roadblocks, and reduced the prominence of armed troops.

The interim, all-military cabinet has been replaced by a permanent one that includes two civilians. The government has imposed a token price decrease on certain consumer staples.

The coup was the culmination of a long process, implemented with nearly unanimous support among the military as well as general public acquiescence. In full view of everyone, the armed forces for many months planned the details of the takeover, which the Peron government was powerless to check.

By delaying as long as they did, the armed forces gave the administration every possible chance either to reform or to discredit itself completely. The lack of resistance—and even some laudatory press comment following the coup—indicates that the strategy worked.

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Argentina. . .

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Collectively, the three-man, intra-service junta has sweeping powers, but it has set up a system that seeks to minimize the influence of any one man, while striving for consensus. The President is to work closely with a nine-man legislative council composed of senior officers of the three services.

The council will communicate the views of the armed forces to the junta and the President and is to have a strong voice in the promulgation of laws.

The junta has replaced virtually all national and regional civilian officials with military men. Congress has been disbanded, all political activity has been suspended, and major labor organizations have been placed under government control. A few splinter parties have been banned outright.

A state of siege is in effect. Terrorists can be shot on sight. Those who try to cripple public services can be tried by military courts and given stiff jail terms or the death penalty.

Frankness in First Speech

In his first speech as President, General Videla on Tuesday assessed the national situation, the reasons for the military's intervention, and the officers' expectations. It was a frank acknowledgment of the gravity of Argentina's problems laced with cautious optimism that progress can be made with the military's firm guidance.

At no time did the President rail against the ousted Peronists, but he made it clear that the junta intends to break with past practices. He said the takeover was nothing less than the "beginning of a new historical era" to be characterized by a national attitude of service. Videla left no doubt that, while he prefers to avoid repression, the government will use force if necessary.

The outlook for Videla and his fellow officers is not particularly bright. They now have complete responsibility for the nation's seemingly intractable problems. Any one of these problems alone would be formidable; in combination they may prove overwhelming, even for an authoritarian government.

The officers now stand toe to toe with a politically aware, articulate population. Unless the regime is prepared to be harshly repressive, it will be hard put to muffle criticism from Peronists and others when its policies threaten the high living standard Argentines have grown accustomed to.

There is great potential for opposition from organized labor and from the ousted Peronist movement. Although all their activities have been suspended, both organizations remain largely intact. Stricter political controls and belt-tightening economic measures are likely causes of friction.

In an extreme case, many more Peronist militants could go underground and join the terrorists. A number of dissident Peronists did so long before the coup, protesting the capture of the movement by the ousted president's conservative inner circle.

Continued attacks by guerrillas, like the killing of two senior police officers in recent days, will reinforce the arguments of those military men who advocate more stringent measures. Resurgent terrorism and popular resistance to economic austerity would provide a pretext for these officers to demand a greater role for themselves in the national administration. In that event, Videla's leadership could be called into question.

The task facing Videla now—which is nothing less than to remake the political, economic, and social attitudes of Argentines—may indeed prove impossible. Now that he is in charge, however, the long-hesitant Videla seems disposed to try.

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